

TEACHING ENGLISH IN SAUDI ARABIA- A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's richest countries. It has witnessed rapid transformation in terms of education since it has been established in 1932. Today Saudi Arabia has around 25,000 schools, a large number of colleges and nearly thirty universities.

The study of Islam remains at the core of the Saudi educational system which provides quality education in various disciplines. Keeping in tune with the global needs Saudi Arabia has been focusing on the acquisition of the English language which has been made a part of the curriculum from Grade IV onwards.

As an English teacher from India, teaching language and literature to under-graduate students, in a rural setting in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I had started studying the various aspects that would further improve the teaching and learning processes of the English language. This paper is an attempt to focus on the challenges and seek solutions with the help of a viable and improvised teaching methodology.

KEYWORDS: Teaching of English in Saudi Arabia, Challenges, Teaching Methodology

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's richest countries. It has witnessed rapid transformation in terms of education since it has been established in 1932. Today Saudi Arabia has around 25,000 schools, a large number of colleges and nearly thirty universities.

The study of Islam remains at the core of the Saudi educational system which provides quality education in various disciplines. Keeping in tune with the global needs Saudi Arabia has been focusing on the acquisition of the English language which has been made a part of the curriculum from Grade IV onwards. The age of Information and Technology has made its impact felt on the country's need to cope with the technological, scientific, social and educational changes and the English language which is the lingua franca of the modern world gains a special emphasis in this context. The unprecedented IT surge has thus resulted in a proliferation of educational institutions that made English a part of their study programs. This has also significantly increased the number of English teachers. Parents of Saudi students aspire to send their students abroad to get the best education and this in turn has naturally increased the inclination to learn English. The government also offers massive scholarship programs to students to enroll themselves in foreign universities.

As an English teacher from India, teaching language and literature to under-graduate students, in a rural setting in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I had started studying the various aspects that would further improve the teaching and learning processes of the English language. I had faced some difficulties and challenges which prompted me to 'understand' the needs and difficulties of the students. They included:

- Low motivational levels of the students
- Fear about a foreign language

- Little or no exposure to the English language
- Lacking in initial preparedness
- Low levels of aptitude in the language
- Parental attitudes
- Attitudinal and psychological issues (Life-Styles)
- Linguistic, cultural, social and personal challenges in learning the target language

There are a few drawbacks in terms of the aspects like:

- Teacher centered activities rather than learner –centered activities (Text-books and Course Design)
- Failure in developing skills and diverting students from ‘rote-learning’ (Pedagogy)
- Assessment methods (Teacher’s Role)
- Lack of stress on motivating the students (Motivation)
- Teaching methods
- Lack of infra-structural facilities (Support from the Institution)

In spite of all these drawbacks, it is very interesting to note that the most number of students get enrolled in the Department of English. The girls (I have taught only girl students keeping up with the norm of the country) are quite enthusiastic in taking up the course and they do get good ‘marks’ in the tests. It is also interesting to note that a few students also get a chance to attend higher courses in a foreign university. But their achievement in terms of acquisition of the target language is not up to the mark. So the teaching of English has to go beyond the chalk and talk method to achieve the required result and to help students perform better at least in the future. For this, the dynamism in teaching approaches has to be explored and put into practice.

CHALLENGES

There are many challenges that the Saudi students face and they are even more pronounced in the case of girl students. Many of them lack the basic knowledge of the environment of a university or sometimes even a formal class room atmosphere. Their intention seems to be to acquire a ‘degree’ in the English Language but they fail in possessing the required focus or need in taking up a particular course. Many a time, they lack a personal zeal to know more.

The students do get exposed to the English language at school level but it seems they are not very successful in acquiring the target language. Most of the teachers are Arab and this fact could be converted into an advantage as the teachers have an edge over foreign teachers in choosing the bilingual method in teaching English. So a poor or sometimes an unprofessional acquisition of language at the school level is also one of the detriments to the student and to the teacher who receives them at the college level.

There are difficulties in terms of linguistic considerations. One of them is the difference in the writing practices of both the languages, English is written from left to right where as Arabic is written from right to left. This aspect results in some confusion on the part of the student. Number characters are non-European and this needs certain practice. In Arabic there are no distinct upper and lower case forms which the students find in the English language. All this slows down recognition and processing of letters. These factors lead to difficulties in displaying literacy skills like skimming and

scanning much required in reading skills and also foster poor writing skills. I.A. Khan has referred to this aspect and has agreed with the view (Abdul Haq, 1982; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984) that “One of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skill” ((Khan:2012).

There are difficulties in terms of pronunciation also. The students cannot pronounce /p/ as in *paint* and instead they use /b/ and say *baint*. These difficulties are also felt in the pronunciation of /t/, /d/ /s/ and /c/, / and in the case of consonant clusters in words such as *marks*, *sticks*. and *things* They say *markes*, *stickes* and *things*. Words like ‘van’, ‘vase’, ‘vest’ Are pronounced as ‘*fan*’, ‘*face*’ and ‘*fest*’ and the reverse also takes place that is substituting /f/ for /v /sound. These difficulties are part of the ‘mother tongue influence’ and ‘inter-lingual error’ (Dulay: 1983). Students also face difficulties in the areas of articles, spellings, words and their different functions in terms of nouns and verbs, synonyms and antonyms, concord and sentence construction. Their ‘answer scripts’ mirror the errors they make in these areas.

As the students’ exposure to the language before joining college is very low as they depend solely on their mother-tongue in their interactions with family, friends and teachers, the onus is upon the teacher at the college level to almost begin from the very basics. At the same time I have encountered ‘surprises’ when I met students trying to speak a foreign language like Hindi which they have acquired through watching popular T.V channels of that language. Very few have also displayed a good knowledge of English which they owed to watching English movies.

So the teacher especially a foreign teacher has to be doubly careful and equally enthusiastic in drawing the student to learn the target language. The initial sense of ‘awe’ displayed by the students wanes off and might give way to boredom and apathy and this is the crucial juncture when the teacher has to unfold her tools.

METHODOLOGY

The theorists of language have propounded many methods of teaching language like the Grammar-Translation method, Audi-Lingual method, the Direct Method, the Functional Approach, the Communicative Approach, Task-based learning and so on. A comprehension of these methods will surely help the language teacher and also encourage one to form a substantial theory of one’s own which is free of rigidity and carries a dynamic spirit. This is the test to the teacher, researcher and inventor. The key lies in discovering compatible solutions.

Swan and Smith (1995:9) probed into the errors made by speakers hailing from around nineteen different L1 backgrounds. Diab (1966) showed the interference of mother tongue (Arabic) in the English writings of EFL students. The contrastive Language Analysis has shown that the EFL students face difficulties as a result of the differences between English and their native language. Robert Lado (1957) observed,

“those elements that are similar to his native language will be simpler for him
and those elements that are different will be difficult.”

These various findings throw light on the various nuances of learning difficulties of the students and help the teacher in approaching those difficulties with a better perception.

Adaptability to the teaching practices definitely helps in this kind of situation. It is this flexibility that sensitizes one to the special problems faced by the students in the given setting and helps cater to their needs in a more effective way. The policy makers’, course-designers’, teachers’ and efforts should effectively culminate in helping the learners develop the skills of the language and in case of students who specialize in the English language it is important to elevate their standards and performances.

In my experience of teaching Linguistics, Grammar, Poetry, Modern Literature, Writing and Reading skills, I tried using some techniques like the think-pair, co-operative learning in terms of teams and themes and minute paper (Angelo:1993), warming-up activities, story-telling, using anecdotes, encouraging inter-active sessions and so on. Involving them through interaction and in-class participation and activities will contribute to their higher level thinking skills and creativity. Interestingly I have also learnt to 'draw' pictures that can instantly help them in comprehending a particular phrase or a situation. This has also led to the students learning more words. Sometimes, I also involve the student in sketching a picture for a particular word or meaning and this activity increases their attention. Many a time they have also made me a 'kinesthetic teacher', when I tried to describe something with gestures. This has also shown me how a teacher sometimes needs to use 'body language' which makes them listen and 'see'. Then from 'action', the process settles down in teaching them the word or words concerned. Some mnemonic techniques also have paid off well in remembering difficult words and definitions. The student also teaches the teacher the 'art of simplification' and gives the teacher a scope to improve and improvise his/her teaching methodologies. The 'board basics' have also gained significance. Organization of the board in a way that suits the comfort level of the students has also been playing a crucial role.

Many of these procedures have given effective learning outcomes like giving the students ability to identify nouns, verbs, verb phrases, identify figures of speech and communicate the meaning of some lines in the poem or a concept in the subjects offered to them. Introducing a 'spoken English' component may also fetch good results. Whatever the subject may be, the teacher can create a space for the students to speak. The process can be conducted through various activities like 'just a minute', role-plays and so on. I have tried it out and it has encouraged a few students to face the class. The numbers may hopefully increase with persistent efforts.

Teaching Poetry is in itself a challenge, but I have understood that if the teacher can tap their imagination through simple meaningful sentences, we can prepare them to enter the zones of the 'poem'. I have tried using pre-lesson activities like writing a simple poem about them on the board. This naturally catches their attention. Then I proceed to give metaphorical sentences like "My mother is as bright as the sun" or "My friend is a flower". The response was quite good with a few students trying out new comparisons. This way, I could bring them the various aspects of 'denotation', 'connotation', and figures of speech. Students thus are given an opportunity to scale up the stages of Bloom's Taxonomy in terms of questions aimed to test their knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Authentic material can also be used to improve the thinking capacity of the student. Activities which involve them in writing a 'poem' have also been successful. Asking some enthusiastic students to teach a concept that they have just learnt has also yielded good results but of course it has to be done under the strict vigil of the teacher. They find the 'shift' exciting and such are the moments we can utilize to give them 'more'. In this context, I have also tried out 'transliteration' of some specific words into Arabic, and this method has helped them remember the pronunciations of some difficult terms.

Pre-lesson activities have also involved grouping up the students and asking them to think about a particular concept that will be taught in that particular session. But to keep up the motivation and involvement levels of all the students is not very easy. But there has been a little improvement in some students who have begun to ask questions and has also led them to discuss 'subjects' even outside the class-room.

Attention may also be given to the admission of students into the Department of English. If an entrance test at least in testing their primary language skills is conducted, it would not only act as a filter but might also encourage students to hone their skills before facing the under-graduate course. In the absence of this procedure, we find that the First Year students find it very difficult to 'settle' down in the new environment. This difficulty may be overcome by giving them a

few Orientation sessions and also by introducing a 'Bridge-Course' before they go to their higher levels. These efforts may provide a better foundation for them.

MULTIMEDIA AND CALL

In a post-Literate and post-Internet setting, there is much scope for the teacher to explore various resources for teaching. I could successfully use PPTS and videos to teach subjects like Linguistics, Poetry and Grammar. But at the same time, one has to keep the cultural sensitivities in view before these presentations and can use discretion in introducing the various aspects of a foreign culture to the students. Students can also be encouraged to make presentations.

The students need to be equipped with a strong base in terms of the LSRW skills so that they will receive the required confidence to take up the courses in their higher levels. The areas of focus include vocabulary, syntax, phonology, morphology, semantics (they often tend to commit errors by building false analogies), intonation and stress, grammatical concepts like concord, verb phrases, tense and prepositions. The syllabus and the textbooks that are prescribed are of a high standard. But most of the time, the students are unable to rise up to the prescribed standards. So the course design should be such that as to develop textbooks that incorporate activities and tasks that utilize the students' knowledge and skill.

According to Richards and Sampson (1974, 15), "At the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort." Introducing the sound system and the phonetic chart to the students in the lower level will definitely help in improving their speaking and listening skills. It will also aid the purpose of comprehending the aspects in the study of 'contrastive analysis' to some extent. The numerous PPTS and videos can supplement these exercises.

The English lab also can play a significant role in enhancing the standards of the students. Specific software and the teacher's own resources may be used during the lab sessions. The lab Sessions should offer such a platform to the students that they can discover themselves. The teacher/facilitator has ample chance of making the student 'break the ice' with self and others in terms of participating in the.. The students' and teacher's expectations must be taken into consideration.

Awareness regarding the concepts of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) have also helped in strengthening the teaching process. Integration of technology does help and also adds to the importance of student-centered learning.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

In this intercultural situation, the members try to negotiate their socio-cultural identities as well as their curricula. And what is interesting is many a time, both the parties are considering another culture. (that is there may be three cultures interacting together) the student's, the teacher's and the culture they encounter through the study of the English language which is foreign to both the student and teacher). According to Kramsch

...socio-cultural identities and ideologies are not static, deterministic constructs that EFL teachers and students bring to the classroom and then take away unchanged at the end of a lesson or course (Kramsch, 1993a)

So it is not very difficult to set up a world in the classroom which experiences a conglomeration of different cultures. In terms of providing a comfort zone for the student, the teacher can exploit this situation. He/she can make the

student understand the fact that learning a foreign language has its own share of challenges but challenges that can be overcome like she /he has overcome. This degree of empathy contributes to building up the confidence level of the students. The material for example if it's a show which the students are expected to watch, they will definitely be placed out of their culture. But at the same time, with the changing world, inter-cultural contact is established through the variety of media that bring images and news from all over the world. Apart from the 'goals' of the activity, which could be listening, collecting vocabulary, observing body language, comprehension of difficult words, meanings and so on, the teacher can also focus on discussing cross-cultural experiences. This can enhance student sensitivities.

Pedagogues are all part of the same community but each teacher is distinct and has his or her own approaches to teaching. In the same way the community of students all over the world might share many similar qualities but they are also share differences depending on the social set-up they come from. So the teacher has to tune herself to the mind-sets of the students who are taking up the challenge of learning in a very traditional and orthodox set-up and paradoxically, the students learn the language that spells change and globalization.

CONCLUSIONS

Be it the inductive method or the deductive method or both, the chalk and talk method, multimedia instruction, the teacher has to make a situational choice and move ahead. There is in fact no '*the class-room methodology*' as such, owing to its dynamic nature. So the English teacher always has the option of adding to her repertoire or deleting from it, the final objective being that of making the whole process an 'outcome based learning'. Humor and a positive attitude work wonders and pay good returns. At the end of the day, I think the teacher has to be a friend, facilitator, teacher, researcher and innovator and open to change thus liberating herself, the student and the methodologies from rigidity.

My experience has also shown me that the 'psychological perspective' is also very important in such a setting where majority of the students are slow-learners. Though the cognitive approach may not be possible at all times, still the teacher may take into consideration the mind-set of the student and build confidence through encouragement and appreciation, offering a not-so- difficult goal and convincing the student about the need to learn English and learn it with sincerity. The need to make the student understand her roles in terms of being a student, group participant, monitor, risk taker and if possible innovator is also important.

It was a process of discovery for me to learn newer techniques of teaching evolving from a specific setting and most of the time the methods have been successful. Increased levels of involvement, eagerness to know more, improvement in speaking and writing skills, team-spirit and an inclination towards career- building have been observed. Monosyllabic exchanges have made way to sentences reflecting their growing confidence.

It is the teacher who has to remain the eternal 'learner' who is equally ready to '*unlearn*' and innovate and also be resourceful to continue one of the most powerful and vibrant processes called 'teaching'. Above all, the experience has showed that apart from qualification and degrees, what a teacher requires is the right attitude and a humanistic approach which includes a display of patience and understanding.

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